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***THE RISING TIGER***  
***(UNITED STATES POLICY CONSIDERATION TOWARDS SOUTHEAST ASIA)***

CORE COURSE ESSAY

CARLA DOUGLAS, GARY PAGLIANO, ELLIOT J ROSNER/CLASS OF 1997  
COURSE 5604  
SEMINAR D  
AMBASSADOR HENRY CLARKE  
DR. BOTSAL, DR. STEVENSON, COL TOM SMITH

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## **INTRODUCTION**

As the 21st Century rapidly approaches, Southeast Asia is at peace and presents significant opportunities for the United States to realize vital objectives of its national security strategy. During the past 50 years, the United States has been involved in two major conflicts in this strategically important region. In World War II, we island hopped through the Philippines enjoying ultimate victory in the Pacific theater while in the Vietnam War, the United States experienced policy failures and conflicts in the nation's will. Southeast Asia, consisting of the countries of Thailand, Cambodia, Burma, Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, and Philippines, (see Figure I below) presents opportunities for the United States to enhance its security, bolster America's economic prosperity and promote democracy abroad. Once the battlefield of the Cold War, experts believe that U.S. presence in the region, the demise of the Soviet Union and the fall of communism have produced a new environment for economic growth and political stability. It is now the breeding ground for fledgling democracies and flourishing economic activity which can contribute significantly to many U.S. national interests well into the next century.

Southeast Asia's geographic location, positioned along one of the most important waterways of the world, near the world's second largest economy, and next to perhaps a burgeoning superpower, points to an area of major strategic importance to the United States. While the United States is participating in multilateral security dialogues, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum, the United States has reduced its military presence and has limited economic interests in the region. Given the region's growing economic importance, there are several U.S. national interests which must be nurtured and monitored in Southeast Asia to ensure that political stability, economic growth in the region and growing

democratic institutions continue their forward progression of independent nation-states that are stable and secure. To ensure these trends continue, the United States needs to maintain regional stability, promote U S economic access, and perhaps enhance U S economic investments in the area. U S national interests, should be considered both generally on a regional basis and country specific because of the diversity and complexity of this region.



FIGURE I - SOUTHEAST ASIA

### UNITED STATES NATIONAL INTERESTS

The United States has several interests in this region which stand out. The most important to the United States for our continuance as the world's sole superpower in the future is the stability of the region, which continues to foster trade and maintain access to open markets. In

order to support these objectives, it is necessary to preserve the security and free passage of naval (maritime and commercial) vessel's sea lines of communications through the critical straits of Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok. The pursuance of democratic governments which advocate improvements in human rights are also high in priority as they tend to lead to better diplomatic relations and decrease considerably the chances of conflicts. Because of the strategic importance of this region and the consequences of conflict undermining our objectives, the continued forward presence of United States military personnel and equipment in the region is vital. With the closures of Clark Air Force Base and Subic Bay Naval Base in the Philippines in 1992, the importance of positioning our naval vessels in the port of Singapore has taken on much greater significance. Additionally, this presence may create the desired environment wherein no single internal or external power takes control of and dominates the entire region. The current balance of power fulfills U.S. needs and those of the countries in the region. Finally, the containment of the development or possible usage of any type weapon of mass destruction and the need to decrease if not stop the flow of illegal narcotics out of the "Golden Triangle" is of great interest to our nation.

The United States has significant interests in trade and investments with Southeast Asia. The ASEAN countries, for example, constitute the largest regional trading partner of the United States after Northeast Asia and the European Union. In 1990, U.S. two-way trade with the ASEAN countries, totaled \$49.5 billion. U.S. exports totaled \$20.6 billion.<sup>1</sup> Not only are U.S. exports to the ASEAN countries large compared with exports to other countries around the world, but their economies have been growing faster than most of the economies around the world. Increased U.S. exports to the region would mean more jobs in the United States. Since

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<sup>1</sup> Bresnan, John, From Dominoes to Dynamos (NY, Council on Foreign Relations Press)27

U S exports to the ASEAN countries are diverse, increased U S economic stimulus, including job creation, would be widely spread across the U S economy. Such U S economic sectors would include electronics, aircraft, computers, engineering equipment, telecommunications equipment, entertainment related products and certain commodities.

In addition, U S investment in the region is significant. U S investment in oil and gas production totals about \$20 billion. Additionally, about \$30 billion is invested in other economic sectors such as minerals mining, manufacturing and financial services including banking.<sup>2</sup> In short, current and potential growth in U S investment in the ASEAN countries and the level of trade with them gives the U S a substantial economic interest in the region.

Lastly, a classic tenet in U S national security strategy is to foster and promote democracy. Democratic institutions and ideals have made progress in some countries of the region. It is in the United States' interest to continue to promote human rights and democratic ideals as appropriate for each country.

### **THREATS**

Even though Southeast Asia currently exhibits positive trends and actions favorable to United States' national security objectives, there are threats to U S national interests in the region that could unravel this positive situation. If the United States were forced out of the region either for political or economic reasons, or if an external power, such as Japan or China, were to dominate the trade and market flow, serious consequences could permeate all the way back to the United States. Our own economy would suffer and the resulting political instabilities in the region could lead to military conflict. Another danger is that the larger economies of China and Japan could dominate this region as trading partners, thus possibly reducing U S economic prosperity.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 25

Closely tied to economic prosperity and regional stability is the issue of free passage of the waterways and security. A closure of the straits restricting free passage of maritime vessels from the Middle East and South Asia to the Far East and subsequently to the United States could also dramatically increase the price of oil and adversely affect the world economy. This act could be considered an act of war and military conflict would surely follow in the region.

Other threats include the following. Economic prosperity often leads to a buildup in defense and defense spending because nations now have the means to upgrade their armed forces and assume a greater role in their own defense. Without safeguards, such buildups can be seen as threatening to neighbors, and lead to an arms race, which can be a destabilizing force in the region. Another potential destabilizing factor in this area is the unresolved territorial disputes. A noteworthy threat to the stability of the region and the interests of the United States could be a change in the current leadership of some of the important countries, who would be less favorable or open to liberalized markets. Should President Suharto die, step down or be overthrown, the situation in Indonesia could change for the worst. If the Ramos government in the Philippines does not succeed, will democracy continue to be the government of choice there? If Vietnam falters, does that nation, which was just brought back into the family of nations and made a member of ASEAN in 1995, revert back to its old form of governance? Does Cambodia and Burma continue to resist change and show preliminary signs of becoming a rogue state? Can Singapore, this tiny gold mine of an island, continue to maintain the economic prosperity and be a center for financial and industrial markets? The United States must remain vigilant regarding these potential threats and as indicators begin to appear reflecting shifts towards any of the aforementioned possibilities, our intervention could be necessary.

## **OPPORTUNITIES**

Despite potential threats, current stability in the region favors positive trends continuing. As a result, increasing opportunities exist for the United States to advance its interests. Assuming that the Clinton Administration will not drastically change its overall national security strategy for their second term of office, engagement and enlargement will and should continue to be the driving force behind our diplomatic, economic and military initiatives. On the economic front, our continued engagement in the developing economies bilaterally shows tremendous promise. Militarily, our presence in the region will enhance the military to military exercises, and through the IMET (International Military Educational Training) program, the senior military leadership and U.S. leadership can form a common understanding in addressing issues important to U.S. interests. While the majority of the agreements that the United States is involved with in the region are bilateral, significant opportunity lies with increased participation in the multilateral organizations in Southeast Asia. Lending support for ASEAN expansion from seven to ten countries by the turn of the century will likely increase stability in the region. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) are vehicles of great promise to increase U.S. political and economic engagement in the region. The establishment of a Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (SEANWFZ) treaty has greatly enhanced stability in the region and should be preserved. These multilateral institutions present opportunities to work on the prominent transnational issues such as the environment, population control, terrorism, and deforestation which are also important to the United States.

## **UNITED STATES NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY**



What should the United States do in formulating its future policy towards the region?

Initially, we should continue to expand our trade and investments in the region and encourage liberal markets. Fostering free open markets can only benefit the entire region and further its integration in the global economy. Secondly, by maintaining a forward presence in the region, we can ensure security of the straits, maintain a balance of power in the region, and enhance our rapid deployment strategy. By encouraging and assisting Southeast Asian countries in developing security transparency and other confidence building measures, the U S can help promote regional stability. Thirdly, the key to success in the region is the further strengthening of the various multilateral organizations in Southeast Asia. Additionally, transnational issues are important and we must find areas of mutual cooperation, which can help strengthen our relationships. Lastly, the issue of human rights must be folded into the equation along with intellectual property rights.

In implementing our strategy, we must remain flexible. We must recognize and accept the cultural differences in our approaches and tailor our transactions/negotiations accordingly. Armed with the knowledge that in this region, informal arrangements rather than formal arrangements work better, we should learn to work within this framework. Country- specific recommendations follow.

#### THAILAND

- \* Continue with the current air and security agreements

#### BURMA

- \* Political reform must evolve before formal dialogue can be established
- \* Encourage involvement of Southeast Asian countries

#### LAOS

- \* Support entry into ASEAN by the turn of the century

### **CAMBODIA**

- \* Build democratic institutions, promote human rights and foster economic development
- \* Prevent Khymer Rouge's return to power
- \* Support entry into ASEAN

### **VIETNAM**

- \* Continue with normalization of diplomatic relations

### **MALAYSIA**

- \* Restart bilateral, military training exercises

### **SINGAPORE**

- \* Continue naval and air agreements
- \* Foster relationship as principal foreign investor and security partner

### **INDONESIA**

- \* Work with government to solve the workers/human rights issues

### **PHILIPPINES**

- \* Continue mutual security agreement
- \* Develop a peaceful resolution to the Spratly's territorial dispute with China

### **CONCLUSION**

For the foreseeable future, United States involvement and presence in the region will help promote stability, guarantee sea lines of communications, promote democratic ideals, and help to enhance the economic prosperity of the region as well as the United States' A core U S interest

in Southeast Asia is economic Southeast Asia's entry into the global economy has significantly benefited the region and the United States Demographic and economic trends indicate continued growth and liberal market practices Experts maintain that maximization of benefits from open markets can only be achieved through more democratic forms of governments Therefore, it is hoped that over time, more democratic forms of government will emerge It follows that human rights problems as well as security concerns could diminish in this area This, however, is a more long term prognosis and is dependent on continued economic growth Additionally, it should be remembered that institutions associated with democratic governments (integrity of elections, powers of legislatures, freedom of the press, and independence of courts, to name a few) are goals that the people of Southeast Asia need to accept and want for themselves enough to struggle for <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 61